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Community-Engaged Signature Work: How a High-Impact Practice May Support Student Well-Being


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Community-Engaged Signature Work: How a High-Impact Practice May Support Student Well-Being

Abstract

When facilitated intentionally and inclusively, signature work—in which students develop culminating products over time, guided by faculty feedback and driven by their own inquiry—has the potential to be a high-impact practice with transformative results. That potential may be heightened when signature work involves community engagement. As we argue in this article, campus practitioners should consider how students' participation in community-engaged signature work may positively affect certain noncognitive outcomes as well as cognitive outcomes.

Disciplines

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Diversity and Democracy

Community-Engaged Signature Work: How a High-Impact Practice May Support Student Well-Being

By: [Ashley Finley](#) and Robert Reason

When facilitated intentionally and inclusively, signature work—in which students develop culminating products over time, guided by faculty feedback and driven by their own inquiry—has the potential to be a high-impact practice with transformative results. That potential may be heightened when signature work involves community engagement. As we argue in this article, campus practitioners should consider how students' participation in community-engaged signature work may positively affect certain noncognitive outcomes as well as cognitive outcomes.

The Benefits of High-Impact Practices

High-impact practices are referred to as such because they have been shown to positively affect a broad range of cognitive outcomes, including students' perceived gains in deep learning, general education skills, practical competence, and personal and social development (Kuh and O'Donnell 2013; Brownell and Swaner 2010). These practices, which Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) have defined according to a list of eight characteristics, benefit diverse student groups, and particularly those traditionally underserved by higher education (Finley and McNair 2013).

Educators and education experts have increasingly paid attention to the fact that these practices might also contribute to students' development of certain noncognitive skills, such as sense of purpose, meaning, and overall well-being. Researchers have begun to make connections between students' participation in high-impact practices and their increased sense of self-confidence, resilience, and self-esteem (Finley and McNair 2016; Finley, Major, and Mitchell, forthcoming).

Service learning, one of the most common high-impact practices, has been shown to positively affect a range of outcomes, particularly those associated with cognitive development, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and grade point average (Brownell and Swaner 2010; Finley 2011). Emerging evidence suggests that service-learning and community-based experiences also contribute to greater levels of perceived flourishing and other noncognitive capacities (Finley 2016). Connecting two high-impact practices—signature work and community engagement—may amplify outcomes for students (see Swaner and Brownell 2010; Finley and Kuh 2015).

Student Well-Being and Signature Work

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Supporting the work of Kuh and O'Donnell (2013), Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010) have argued that high-impact practices typically share three essential characteristics: high levels of effort, high levels of interaction (including feedback), and high levels of reflection. Students' engagement in signature work appears to meet several of these criteria. By definition, signature work requires high levels of effort from students over extended periods of time. During these periods, students are typically revising and refining their work through ongoing collaboration and interaction with faculty members, and, in some cases, community partners and peer reviewers. Finally, students are often asked to reflect on the process of creating their signature work.

If signature work is a high-impact practice, to what degree might it affect students' whole-person development, in addition to their development of cognitive outcomes? Constructing signature work involves more than integrating knowledge, problem-solving, and critical thinking; it also involves trying and failing, testing the limits of one's passion for a single subject, and understanding one's personal endurance. These outcomes are as relevant as intellectual skills to the successful completion of a project; one could even argue that noncognitive skills, such as resilience and perseverance, are the qualities that actually get a student's signature work to the finish line.

Students who position their signature work within a community-based context have even greater opportunities to explore the real-world implications of their projects; they encounter problems so complex that the solutions are contingent upon more than intellectual or financial resources. Community engagement reminds students that human connection, self-care, and care for others are vital resources for effecting change.

Campus Climate and Student Well-Being

If community-engaged signature work is to be most effective in promoting students' overall well-being, then the context within which students engage with the work is vitally important. Research suggests that students' perceptions of campus climate can influence learning and developmental outcomes (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Our own research, a study funded by Bringing Theory to Practice and conducted in partnership with the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI), found preliminary evidence suggesting that campus climate contributes to at least one measure of student well-being: levels of flourishing.

Using the concept of flourishing outlined by Keyes (2012), researchers found that students' individual behaviors and perceptions of campus climate—particularly those related to contributing to a larger community—were related to a greater sense of flourishing. Specifically, students who participated in community-based projects (whether associated with a course or not) and who reported having meaningful conversations with peers about community needs reported higher levels of flourishing. Students on campuses in which there was an ethos that promoted contributing to larger communities also reported higher levels of flourishing than similar students at campuses without such an ethos (Mitchell et al. 2016).

These and other emerging findings (see Barnhardt, Sheets, and Pasquesi 2015; King 2016) begin to paint a picture of connections among campus climates, practices that are

characteristic of community-engaged signature work, and student well-being. As mentioned above, Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010) have suggested that effective high-impact practices must include high levels of effort and opportunities for reflection. Findings from the collaborative research between Bringing Theory to Practice and the PSRI suggest that effort put forth in service to the community, coupled with reflective interactions with peers, correlates with greater reported well-being. Participation in these activities within the context of campus climates that emphasize the importance of contributing to the larger community likely increases positive effects on students' flourishing.

Conclusion

Signature work, when intentionally and inclusively implemented across disciplines, could very well be considered a high-impact practice. Moreover, connecting community engagement to signature work holds the promise of immersing students deeply in the real-world implications of complex problems and their solutions. In providing these experiences for all students, campus leaders (faculty, staff, and administrators) should consider how these experiences uniquely contribute to students' development of cognitive *and* noncognitive skills. Preliminary evidence on high-impact practices in general, and service learning in particular, suggests that students' engagement may result in certain noncognitive outcomes, particularly self-reported levels of flourishing. As students explore their signature work in community settings, they may not only be learning well, they may also be learning to *live* well.

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